



ENVIRONMENT NEWS POLITICS

Hundreds of millions to remove lead pipes flowing into Illinois as city replaced just a fraction of total this year

Chicago, with nearly 400,000 lead service lines, hopes to get a big slice of federal infrastructure money after only 20 were replaced last year.

By Brett Chase | Dec 6, 2021, 6:00pm CST



Chicago water department crews, seen here at a water main break, replaced only about 20 lead service lines under a plan announced by Mayor Lightfoot more than a year ago. | Ashlee Rezin/Sun-Times file

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Illinois is expected to get \$288 million for lead-pipe replacements and other water-related programs in the coming weeks under the recently passed federal infrastructure law, money that advocates hope will force Chicago and other cities to act on promises to address a major health threat.

Chicago has nearly 400,000 lead-service lines for drinking water, the highest number for any U.S. city. Critics say city officials should have tackled the multi-billion dollar problem years ago, and Mayor Lori Lightfoot last year criticized former Mayor Rahm Emanuel for not replacing the lines, saying the “time for reckoning is now.” Her administration has since overseen only a small number of lead-line conversions after promising hundreds would be completed.

It’s not yet known how much money Chicago will eventually get with the federal windfall, which is the first annual allotment over five years.

With so many homes in need of replacements, it will cost billions of dollars and the initial money won’t be able to solve the problem entirely. However, with hundreds of millions expected to flow into the state over the next several years, Lightfoot will be hard pressed to maintain a go-slow approach.

“This is really a once in a lifetime opportunity for a problem that has been plaguing Chicago for decades,” said Erik Olson, a senior strategist at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington. “Now that there’s money, there really isn’t an excuse not to do this.”

The NRDC has advocated for cities to recognize lead pipes as a crisis and replace them with any means possible.

Newark, New Jersey, replaced almost 23,000 lead lines in less than three years — nearly all of the pipes that were in need of replacement — but that did not come without a fight. Lawyers for NRDC represented a group of Newark teachers who sued to get the city to get rid of the lead lines.

“Political will only occurs when the social and political meet the economic will,” said Yvette Jordan, a Newark high school teacher who was a plaintiff in the case.

While Newark was reluctant, city officials there figured out how to replace lines efficiently and in a cost-effective manner, replacing the pipes at costs far less than the city of Chicago’s estimate of nearly \$30,000 per home, Olson said.

Chicago’s water department is exploring techniques that may lower the costs, spokeswoman Megan Vidas said.

Lightfoot announced a plan in 2020 to **replace around 600 lead lines** this year, though that program will fall far short of its goal. The city completed only about 20 replacements, and the water department is promising to pick up its pace, Vidas said. Meanwhile, the city is going “to advocate for the maximum allocation possible” to fund more replacements with federal dollars.

The city “welcomes this historic federal investment in infrastructure modernization,” Vidas said.

A law passed in Springfield mandating cities act on the issue this year gives Chicago up to 50 years to replace its lead lines.

An NRDC 2020 ranking of cities with lead-service lines showed Chicago was by the far the highest in the state with almost 390,000 lines. Next was Aurora with almost 20,000 lines, Cicero with almost 15,000, Rockford and Joliet — each with almost 14,000 — and Evanston with more than 11,000.

Illinois has the most lead-service lines of any state with 680,000, according to NRDC.

“There’s more coming in the years ahead to help Illinois increase access to safe drinking water and to replace lead pipes,” said U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, who helped lead the fight for water infrastructure money.

In a letter to Gov. J.B. Pritzker last week from President Joe Biden’s Environmental Protection Agency, the governor was told additional guidance on the funding will be forthcoming.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan urged in the letter to address the most disadvantaged communities first and to speed up removal of lead pipes.

While most of the new federal money is expected to go toward replacement of lead pipes for water, some funding will be available for communities addressing so-called forever chemicals contamination. The state spent the past year assessing the **levels of exposure to drinking water systems** across Illinois.

Contributing: Rachel Hinton

Brett Chase's reporting on the environment and public health is made possible by a grant from The Chicago Community Trust.